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ABSTRACT

The waning interest in classical studies, particularly affecting Latin language study, in Canada is pointed out and probed for the underlying reasons. The main weaknesses contributing to the declining enrollment figures are seen to be an outdated teaching methodology, an overemphasis on grammar, and failure to interest students in the ideas and ideals of the classics prior to language study. The author suggests a strategy to integrate the study of the closed social system of classical antiquity with more current sociological studies, thereby making Latin relevant to the student. (RL)

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WHAT CLASSICS HAVE TO OFFER IN THE SEVENTIES

In Canada we are experiencing an amazing and sudden decline in Classics -- a decline which has prompted the Classical Association of Canada to launch a major investigation of the Classics at all levels of education and to include on its 1970 annual program a panel discussion on the state of Classics. After listening to some remarks made by this panel and reinforced in my reaction by having heard many of the same things a year earlier in Bonn at the International Congress, I came away wondering what the future does have in store for the Classics and, more selfishly, for Classicists.

What do the Classics have to offer in the Seventies? Do they in fact have any place in the schools or should they go the way of Sanskrit? In Canada, and more particularly in Ontario, we are at the crisis stage, a crisis which has come swiftly, so much so that few foresaw it and even fewer made any serious efforts to forestall the decline -- which now, with hindsight, appeared to be inevitable. The causes should be obvious, but are they?

I should begin with the usual dreary indictment of the past so that I may get it out of my system once and for all and so that the reasons for our decline may become clearer. I should also make it clear that the situation which I am about to describe is Canadian, although it may sound terribly familiar. For generations, Classics in Ontario were forced upon captive classes from Grades 10 to 13, unless dropping out of school altogether brought relief. The curriculum consisted of three years of learning declensions, conjugations, syntactical normalities and abnormalities, writing in Latin little sentences carefully selected for their illumination of an important grammatical point and translating

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into English short Latin sentences of the plume de ma tante variety. Of course, there was a bit of reading: in a week some 10 to 15 lines of made-up Latin, especially picked to illustrate the new grammar rather than for any intrinsic interest! After nearly three years of this and the learning of the 99th use of the Ablative Case and being able to write or recite a sliding tense synopsis (backwards if called for), the few students who stuck it out or who survived were rewarded with fragments of Caesar Gallic Wars, a couple of months out of the Hannibalic War, perhaps Nepos, Life of Hannibal and finally a very few poems of Horace, a few of Catullus (none of the livelier ones, at least not in the past), and snippets of Vergil. All this reading was done slowly and painfully, while all too often the emphasis was still upon the grammar; when we weren't doing this, we were learning to produce polished English translation or to write even better Latin. When greater freedom was granted to the students in selecting courses a few years ago, is it any wonder that they opted for industrial arts, communications and the like? With greater freedom granted to the teacher, one could hope for a breaking away from the old routine, yet how many teachers trained in the old rigorous tradition are really equipped to talk about the beauties of Vergil and the profundities of Horatian Odes? I'm very much afraid that we all tend to teach what we know and what we have learned. It requires a tremendous act of will to change.

Classes have now shrunk drastically, both in English and French-speaking Canada, but statistics are depressing. Suffice it to say that the Classical Association of Canada has for years conducted Sight Translation Contests in both Latin and Greek at high school and university level; each year of the three of my Secretariat the number of entrants has dwindled a bit further to the point that the Association has begun to question their usefulness. It is not a simple case of a decline in student numbers: Latin is now being squeezed out of timetables the way

Greek was a few years ago and Greek itself has virtually disappeared. Boards of education are not hiring as many Latin teachers as tightened finances dictate the cancellation of 'non-productive' or small courses. The decline has now reached the universities, reducing freshman Latin classes to a third of their former size in only four years; this comes, too, at a time when universities are pulling in their belts financially. Harried presidents are bound to question the allocation of funds to high-cost departments. Yet colleagues at some universities seem almost oblivious to the peril, while others have rushed to implement stop-gap changes and a sprinkling of oft-despised "Classics in Translation" courses, with more regret than with any thoughtful consideration of the role of Classics in the curriculum of the future. The heavy British influence in Canadian classics may well account for the expectation that somehow we will muddle through in the end!

The situation is scarcely new. I often wonder how we were so blind to the coming danger. Gilbert Highet tells two amusing stories of the 1800s which are worth re-hearing:[1]

> "As a boy I had the common experience of 50 years ago - teachers whose sole object was to spoonfeed classes, not with the Classics but with prosody and syntax. My experience was that of thousands, yet, as I remember, we were athirst for good literature .. What a tragedy to climb Parnassus in a fog!"

That is Sir William Osler's description of his classical education at a Canadian school in 1866. The result was that the young Osler turned toward science and became a brilliant doctor, yet at least he knew that there was a Parnassus and continued throughout his life to admire the Classics. The second tale is that of Butler, later the president of Columbia, who wrote of his classical work in 1879

> "The teaching of the classics ... was almost wholly that dry-as-dust type which has pretty near killed classical study in the

> United States. Professor ... was so given to insistence upon the minutest details of grammar that our eyes were kept closely fixed on the ground and we hardly ever caught any glimpse of the beauty and larger significance of the great works upon which we were engaged."

Not long ago a colleague said that the trouble with Classics today was Classicists, ones who had forgot (if they had ever understood) that our task has always been to make our subject relevant to the age in which we live. Indeed, "relevance" is the cry of the radical student today. Despise him as we may, we should listen to him and in so doing recapture the very goals which were lost shortly after the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was an era as turbulent as our own, marked by sudden change and the abolition and substitution of ideas and systems already long established and very powerful. It was a spiritual uprooting, when conflicts persisted not just between Catholicism and Protestantism but between liberals and conservatives, between upper and middle classes, between science and superstition or theology, and between authority and the individual. The conflicts should sound familiar to those of us here today as we enter the Seventies. Although Renaissance means "rebirth" only Greco-Roman culture was "reborn" while most other things were destroyed in the conflicts.[2] Might we draw some hope for the future from this? Might we not capitalize upon this very point?

The Baroque period suffered from a lack of imagination which used Classical cliches as short-cuts or substitutes for creative thought.[3] The advent of the revolutionary age saw a move away from the Classics even if some of its strongest inspirations derived from the Greek world, a world which opposed artificiality and tyranny.[4] Men found in antiquity a body of experience and a world outlook that could provide some aid in reforming civilization and giving it a new direction. Surely today we are in a comparable age of revolutionary change and like previous ages

should draw from antiquity what is most pertinent or relevant to us.

The decline of interest in Classical studies has been caused by many factors. "The rapid advance of science, industrialism, and international trade" created a multitude of new subjects which have at least as good a right to stand in the curriculum of the schools.[5] Students who before would have studied the Classics have turned to the sciences and to modern languages, for which they can see a ready use in this age of increased mobility. Latin and Greek, besides being dead (let us admit that they are and quit making excuses), are not easy languages and perhaps are impractical in today's non-elitist schools. "The subjects taught and respected in schools are the subjects which everyone can assimilate."[6] But more and more we must admit that bad, nay appalling, teaching has hurt the Classics. My criticism should not be misunderstood: I attack not teachers but the system. Classical literature has been ruined by being taught as propaedeutic, as a help in learning English, as a step in developing logical thought, as a parallel to mathematics in acquiring precision. I grant that all these things happen as a result of studying Latin or Greek, just as readily as I admit that "it is impossible to teach Latin and Greek without precision: grammar and syntax are essential parts of the study of a language."[7] It is, however, necessary to give more than this or we will be like the old schoolmaster who claimed that "we are here to parse Caesar, not to praise him" or the one who introduced his pupils to a new play saying "Boys, this term you are going to have the privilege of reading the Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles, a veritable treasure-house of grammatical peculiarities."[8]

There is much more wrong with the Classics than we have either the time or the desire to look at. Highet complained that too little attention was being paid to interpretation and far too much to "research", research

into more and more remote corners of our field. The trend is not limited to the Classics but we are more vulnerable to the gap which now exists between the scholar and the public. When we ignore the relevance of our work to the contemporary world, we merely encourage the public neglect which we in vain deplore.[9]

Today's radicals complain that we have created a world which is materialistic and too concerned with money and power, the same kind of charge levied against the Romans. Yet I hope civilization is more than the pursuit of wealth and possessions. The Greeks were crafty businessmen yet civilized: they were interested in the mind and the soul. Their civilization passed on to the Romans and through the Romans to us, naturally somewhat altered by the intervening ages. It is our heritage and we cannot totally ignore it. Surely we can learn that the powerful Romans waned when they used their power and subsequent wealth solely for the pleasures of the flesh, fancy yachts, gaudy parties, and so forth. We have much, too much, in common with the Romans: we have grown powerful and wealthy through military, political, scientific and industrial genius. If the Romans learned civilization from someone else, perhaps we can too. Education is the obvious means to that desirable end. The educated man does more than read his daily newspaper, see the latest movies and watch the older ones on television; he has broader vistas which he has acquired through a study of man and his creative genius. I think that this is what the young are trying to tell us more and more as they reject technology and burn computers while they search for human values. What better place to learn the human values than the ethical teachings of the Greek social philosophers and the writings of the finest literature that the western world has produced? Besides, as one wise colleague put it, classical civilization is like a dead fish, while another wrote that it provides us with a laboratory in which to explore a great variety of relevant problems

... "imperialism, the urban poor, the role of the arts, the use or misuse of science," social and political problems and the conflict between the establishment and the rest of society."[10] These are the very questions students want to know about and should be encouraged to ask so that they may develop their value system. Can they not do this as well within Classical Studies as they can in Sociology? At least Classics presents us with a closed system which can be carefully analyzed. Instead of bewailing the fact that Latin and Greek are dead languages, we should make use of the fact.

To get more directly to my theme, I have no hesitation in saying that the Classics do have something to offer the Seventies just as surely as they had something to offer hundreds of years ago. The whole of western literature has evolved out of Classical literature and our historical development is heavily conditioned by what the classical world created. These are the emphases we must make for the coming decades, and should have been making all along. One teacher in Ontario recently wrote that he foresaw the introduction into Grade 9 of a course in the main areas of antiquity, which would be a non-language survey of classical civilization. In the following year there would be a split into two streams, not entirely mutually exclusive, one stream getting into a study of the language (with, I would hope, drastically changed methodology), and the other stream continuing the work in translation begun in the first year.[11] In the universities, there has been a rapid increase in the number of non-language Classics courses, as we seek to put before students what the classical world has to offer in literature, history, art, architecture, religion, mythology and so on. For such courses, I make none of the apologies I hear so frequently from Canadian academics. I happen to believe that Classics have something to say and that something should be available to the non-language student. The proliferation on translations in paperback

form attests to an interested public. Who can guide the non-specialist as well as a Classicist? Who else can inspire students to read the material in the original languages? While I hesitate to admit it, others have been more capable of passing on the classical tradition than we have ourselves. Our training has not been of the right variety and too rarely have we made the tremendous effort to improve our image.

This then is what Classics must stress in the coming years: the similarity of today's problems to those of the past. The answers of antiquity to those problems will scarcely be our own answers for, despite the old cliche, history does not repeat itself. Yet I rarely talk about Pericles and the golden age of Athens without making reference to Degaulle's politique de grandeur. When students want to discuss participatory democracy I cannot resist the opportunity to relate it to Athens or to the Spartan type of polis. An anti-war demonstration always makes me recall Aristophanes' Lysistrata. To step perhaps on sensitive toes, the "credibility gap" of LBJ or President Nixon had their parallels. I have no doubt that Crassus was a "dirty capitalist" or that some of the doctrines put forth today by hippies, yippies and others of the sort have been heard before and that the Athenians thought the Sophists were something like them. Antigone's struggle against arbitrary authority or Prometheus' rebellion against arbitrary use of power surely have their relevance and always will have. The outraged feelings of Juvenal and the disillusionment of Petronius with the state of public morality are just as true expressions as those of any current commentator on the public scene. In Classics we can even top the pornography of I AM CURIOUS, YELLOW or OH! CALCUTTA! I see no reason to hide our wealth of material under a basket.

The Classics have always been champions of liberal humanism and should continue to carry out this important function. We should continue to hold

out the ideals of Hector or Aeneas; we should continue to probe deeper into human values as Horace and Vergil did; we should continue to study moral values or ethics, most of which were stated centuries ago by Plato and Socrates. Western civilization has two main feeders: the Greco-Roman culture and the Judeo-Christian culture (which in large part derives from the Greco-Roman culture). To my mind there will always be a place for the Classics in the curriculum both of the secondary schools and of the universities. To reject the Classics is to reject a large part of our heritage.

Nonetheless if Classicists continue to fumble, the transmission of the magnificent heritage of which I have been speaking will go to others. What I see for at least the Seventies is the expansion of "Classical Studies" and an increased emphasis on the ideas and ideals which the classical world has given to our century. It is only when students begin to realize that we have something to offer that they will turn to a study of the languages themselves; at that point we must be ready with many new techniques or language instruction or we will turn them off again as we have so lamentably done before. In the meantime, we have a whole generation of teachers to re-educate, not in more efficient language teaching, but in the whole classical tradition. This is to my mind our greatest challenge in the coming years.

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NOTES

1. Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition, New York, Oxford University Press (1957) 490-491
2. ibid. 178-181
3. ibid. 357
4. ibid. 360-1
5. ibid. 493
6. ibid.
7. ibid. 495
8. ibid. 494
9. ibid. 499-500
10. A. J. Kahn, "An Arrogant Proposal" Class. News and Views xiv, 2 (1970) 35
11. H. F. Lacey, "The Experimental Syndrome and Classical Studies" Class. News and Views xiii, 2 (1969) 39-44